

Young people, climate change and COVID-19

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We are striking because we have done our homework, and they have not.

Greta Thunberg

Two thousand and twenty has been a surprising and challenging year for many young people, with the unimaginable emergence of a global pandemic and dramatic changes to our day-to-day lives. In the background, before the coronavirus was even contemplating jumping from bats to humans, there had been a global awakening that climate change is real and dangerous, especially among the young populations of the world. Like a lightning rod, Greta Thunberg exploded into the public consciousness and young people were mobilised to march in the streets around the world for urgent action on climate change. What can we learn from the COVID-19 pandemic about how young people can respond to climate change?

It is important to appreciate that the current young generation have grown up as digital natives. They bring powerful social justice values to their hyperconnected world, and this makes them a force to be reckoned with. In a world that was already limping towards a climate catastrophe and now finds itself on its knees during a global pandemic, young people have an important message to tell the world.

In this chapter we argue that climate change is indeed an intergenerational issue, one that is going to be most acutely felt by those young people whose lives will span the coming decades. Perhaps the COVID pandemic will become that moment in history when young people shake up the old systems, reimagine the way we organise our societies and ultimately steer humanity to a safe and healthy future.

Young people and climate change

Who is defined as young? According to the World Health Organization, young people are defined as 10–24 years of age.¹ Generation Z are in a similar age range of 5–24 years of age. Generational groups share major life experiences and are often shaped by global social, political or health crises or events. Gen Z has been largely shaped by the war on terror, technological advancements, economic instability, increasing global warming and extreme weather events. Of course, every young person's experience of growing up is different; however, there are some generational themes and characteristics emerging.

A McKinsey report² sheds light on some of the defining characteristics of Gen Z, and it goes some way to explaining why this generation is so attuned to issues such as climate change and other social justice issues. McKinsey report that Gen Z trends toward seeking uniqueness, strong ethical values and a fundamental search for the truth about the reality of the world. They also report what they describe as a tendency to a 'communaholic' approach, which involves radical inclusiveness of all people. At the recent democratic convention, Obama summarised this communaholic tendency well. On young people, he remarked: 'Earlier generations had to be

persuaded that everyone has equal worth. For you, it's a given — a conviction'.³

They are a generation of digital natives who manage multiple realities and complex social networks effortlessly. Gen Z is passionate about issues facing society and evaluates success not based purely on financial gain or GDP, but rather in its benefit to the wider society. Consequently, young people tend to value environmental stability and prioritise the planet over profits. So, it is useful to understand these generational values as the backdrop for a stage set with climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Australia young people are fortunate to have grown up in a period of relative stability, without the pressures that previous generations may have experienced, such as wars, conflicts and economic depression. Free from generational pressure just to survive, the younger generation have had the opportunity to explore, stop and think about what is important to a 'good life' and become passionate about social justice and environmental causes.

They are also the first generation who have grown up with such an acute awareness of the climate crisis. They see the effects of a destabilised climate, such as unprecedented bush fires, the hottest heatwaves on record and devastating droughts. In addition to extreme weather events, young people have experienced the pollution and degradation of the natural environment and fragile ecosystems, and a booming world population stretching the planetary boundaries of the earth's ecosystems. Due to these experiences and the high visibility of environmental impacts so accessible through general and

social media, many young people are inspired to strive for a better world and believe in their ability to create change.

Indeed, the 2019 Mission Australia Youth Survey⁴ finds environmental concerns sit near the top of the ladder of young people's worries. When 25,126 youth were asked to list the issues they consider most important in Australia, concerns about 'the environment' as an issue of national importance climbed from eighth place in 2018 to second place in 2019. This reflects the growing momentum and intensity of youth action and concern on climate change in recent years. One of the more concerning issues highlighted in the Mission Australia Survey was that over 90% of the youth believed that they did not have a voice when it comes to public affairs. This is despite the fact that young people will be the ones handling the future negative consequences of the global climate crisis.

Young digital natives as global activists

Consequently, young people are developing new ways to have their voices heard, such as the widely reported global climate strikes. The #FridaysForFuture movement initiated by Greta Thunberg quickly attracted millions of young student strikers demanding urgent climate action. In the unfolding awakening of youth activists, many young people are grappling with the vast disparity between the existential threat of global warming, and the state of denial by governments and leaders throughout the world who seem unable to appropriately respond to the crisis and take meaningful action. In the words of Greta Thunberg, 'we are striking because we have done our homework, and they have not'.⁵

Young strikers have expressed much frustration at the state of the world due to the negligent behaviour of their elders, which is directly jeopardising their future. Young people have highlighted the absurdity of prioritising economic growth over environmental stability when facing an existential threat to civilisation. However, along with those frustrations, there is hope and a determination for a better future. By channelling their concerns for the climate into action, young people are further building their resilience and finding their roles as agents of change.

The young generation have had the benefit of being incredibly technologically savvy, enabling them to coordinate mass protests seamlessly and to be louder and more far reaching with their message than previous generations. Social media platforms have also played an important role in connecting youth from all around the world and empowering young people to collaborate and create awareness on a global scale. Young people also have unprecedented access to online resources and educational materials on climate change, enabling a generation of informed activists. Increased access to online materials similarly requires a need to interpret evidence and information critically, as online forums, articles and journals can be written to serve political or corporate agendas.

While previous generations also protested passionately on issues of climate change and social justice, they did so without such a global interconnectedness to their peers across the world. In contrast, the massive level of communication and awareness among Gen Z has enabled them to generate momentum and mobilise people to collectively take action.

Furthermore, social media has allowed young people to engage in the political system before they are able to vote by applying pressure to governments and communicating issues that are important to them. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, young people have moved the school strike for climate online, harnessing social media to continue to spread their message and finding new ways to organise to make the movement stronger.

Young people dealing with climate change through the lens of COVID-19

Young people find themselves at a crossroads in history when there are two massive invisible threats to human health: COVID-19 and climate change. The symptoms of both are visible — dry cough, fever, fatigue ... rising oceans, melting polar ice, extreme weather events. The COVID-19 pandemic and climate change are both global crises that require immediate, sustained local and global action. For young people there are five lessons from the COVID-19 response that could be applied to climate action.

Young people have seen that *government bodies can put aside differences*, collaborate and work together in response to a common threat. During the pandemic, collaboration between government and businesses, communities and the general public has increased. It has demonstrated the importance of evidence-based decision making, and the value of science and expert advice in informing government decisions and action. We are yet to see this level of coordinated response to climate change, with those in power largely failing thus far to treat the climate crisis as an existential emergency. However, the

pandemic has demonstrated that this level of coordinated response is possible.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that the consequences of *failing to act in time to a global threat can be catastrophic*, as exemplified by the United States' record breaking COVID-19 case numbers and deaths.⁶ Regarding climate change, a report by the United Nations indicates that we have an estimated 10 years to drastically reduce our environmental pollution before we reach a tipping point.⁷ Surpassing the environmental tipping point would lead to subsequent famines, droughts, flooding and extreme weather events that would cause widespread destruction and mass fatalities, in addition to potentially rendering the planet uninhabitable.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also encouraged *a greater global awareness of the fragility of the planet and human health*. At the very least, it has showcased the interconnectedness between public health, the environment, the economy and government, and the importance of coordinated systems-level responses. Contemporary notions of planetary health have gained momentum in the public health discourse and have now arrived in the mainstream consciousness. COVID-19 has reminded humanity of the indispensable value of the earth's basic ecological systems — clean air, clean water, safe climate and food security — which all underpin human health and societal functioning.

COVID-19 has demonstrated that *young people can be at the heart of societal responses to environmental crises*. So many of the Gen Z values, such as ethical purpose, equity and social connection, have been amplified by the COVID-19 experience, the

pandemic itself, the lockdowns and the resultant need for community cooperation. A Deloitte study⁸ found that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about a stronger sense of individual responsibility among millennials and Gen Z. The younger generation have been central to providing essential services during the pandemic and undertaking dramatic restrictions to their day-to-day lives despite being at much less risk of serious illness from COVID-19 than the older generations.

The pandemic has also emphasised *the importance of protecting mental health of young people during a major environmental crisis*, and there are lessons here too for how we deal with the climate crisis. For a lot of young people, COVID-19 has been an incredibly difficult and challenging time, having direct impacts on mental health and wellbeing.⁹ Young people have the extra pressures of experiencing a pandemic while navigating a key period of social, emotional and physical development at a point at which they are most at risk of mental illness. Unfortunately, extreme climate events and climate change will also negatively impact young people's mental health. More mental health services and investment are required to support young people to create healthcare systems that are easy to access and navigate, to respond to the current crisis, in addition to future climate crises. COVID-19 has been a great reminder of the need to prepare mental health systems to deal with the fallout from environmental crises.

Young people coping with uncertainty about the future

The positive coping strategies young people are learning in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic will assist them greatly in navigating future challenges and strengthen their belief in

their ability to cope in the face of adversity. Skills such as seeking professional and social support, self-expression through art, music and literature, or by implementing daily exercise programs and creating healthy routines, are critical in promoting wellbeing and protection from mental distress.

Through the drastic adaptations to the COVID-19 pandemic, young people have found that the systems that shape their lives are more malleable and arbitrary than previously imaginable. For example, the way the population communicates, socialises, works and lives has all been turned upside down as they engage in everything from work meetings, weddings and funerals via a screen. And yet, society has rapidly adapted.

Concurrently, in addition to climate strikes, young people have been leading the way in major societal movements, the Black Lives Matter movement, gender equality and LGBTIQ+ social movements. They are using their voice to call out broken systems and rethink new ways forward, encouraging people to question the systems in which the world operates. As a result of the massive social, economic and environmental disruptions this generation has experienced, young people have developed strong skillsets such as activism, solving problems and thinking big.

Young people are also finding new ways to take back power within existing systems. There is a growing wave of climate litigation in which young people are utilising the legal system to sue companies and superannuation providers for negligent behaviour contributing to climate change. Additionally, a class action has been launched on behalf of young people seeking an injunction against the Australian government to stop the

approval of coalmine extensions, arguing it will harm young people by exacerbating climate change.¹⁰

COVID-19 has shone a light on the inequities in society and how vulnerable populations are more negatively affected by crises — and young people are taking note. Similar to COVID-19, extreme weather events linked to climate change will also unfairly cause a larger burden for vulnerable populations through displacement, food and water scarcity, unemployment, poverty, exacerbation of chronic health conditions and negative impact on mental health. COVID-19 has ignited further youth activism for equity and equality for marginalised groups, by mobilising communities and demanding change. In the case of extreme weather events, action for a more equitable society and increased support for vulnerable groups will improve our capacity to ensure marginalised groups do not unfairly bear the brunt of negative consequences.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic has created a shift towards more local and sustainable practices in the way people live their lives. Shopping close to home to support local growers and businesses has become a necessity during the pandemic. Buying local food can contribute to a smaller carbon footprint due to reduced food transport and subsequent greenhouse gas emissions. Young people have also learnt to travel more mindfully and intentionally, and to explore their own backyard before setting foot afar.

The way forward

There is no going back to normal after the COVID-19 pandemic, and that is a good thing. The way things were was not sustainable. There is an opportunity to use this reflective moment to

consider the kind of future we wish to make for ourselves. There is a great opportunity to come out of the COVID-19 crisis with positive action towards the climate change crisis. Society must invest in renewables and implement green stimulus policies and act to reduce our carbon footprint immediately. It is clear that communities must invest in mental health and resources that will support young people through climate emergencies. It is critical, too, that the unprecedented economic stimulus in response to COVID-19 should be invested in sustainable recovery to safeguard the environment for future generations.

Unfortunately, there is a strong group of well-financed lobbyists and sections of the conservative media who are arguing for climate wrecking and scaling up of old dirty technologies, supposedly to create a strong COVID-19 recovery. This approach can only exacerbate climate problems, and must continue to be strongly resisted by energetic young climate activists.

Young people's voices matter

There is a great need for people all over the world to bring their unique skills, creativity and passions to address the climate change crisis. Young people can harness their existing skill-sets and individual strengths to progress the cause and push for climate action. From musicians to social media influencers, to teachers or researchers, there is a role for everyone to assist in communicating the urgency and global challenge of addressing the climate crisis. Climate change activism can span many different outlets, through music, science, art, education, campaigning, policy, technology and law. Finally, there is a need for a greater inclusion of youth voices to protect the future of our

planet. Older generations in power must listen to the voices of change and provide more platforms for youth participation. Decisions on climate action that will directly impact the future of younger generations should not take place without them having a seat at the table.

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